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ABSTRACT

Research studies concerned with sex-role stereotypes have noted that behavior is often shaped by expectations others hold about certain individuals. In one experiment, female undergraduates who expected to meet attractive desirable men portrayed themselves as more feminine and performed less intelligently on a bogus IQ test when they thought the man held conventional views of women. A follow-up study of this phenomenon indicated that female undergraduates applying for a Research Assistant position presented themselves in a more traditionally feminine manner when they believed that the male interviewer held traditional views of women. In a second follow-up study, male subjects watched a videotaped female job applicant present herself either in a stereotypically feminine or less traditional manner. Results indicated that, for traditionally female occupations, the feminine self-presentation was judged more positively; however, for traditionally male occupations, the less traditional presentation was judged more positively. The findings suggest that, although stereotypes may be maintained because they induce people to confirm them, women who wish to succeed in male-dominated occupations should abandon stereotypically feminine modes of self-presentation. (NRB)

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On Confirming Others' Sex-Role Stereotypes[1]

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On Confirming Others' Sex-Role Stereotypes

The question I would like to address today is how sex-role stereotypes might be maintained. Let me begin by describing a study exploring this issue conducted a few years ago by a student, Susan Pack, and myself.

We began by noting that our behavior is often shaped by the expectations that attractive (or powerful) others hold for us. We next reasoned that sex-role stereotypes can be thought of as a set of expectations about the way men and women ought to behave. Finally, we concluded that if we believe a person we want to impress holds the conventional sex-role stereotype of our own gender, we will be motivated more than usual to behave in sex-role stereotypic ways.

If true, this implies that many of the gender differences in behavior, that have been documented by psychologists over the years, may be due, in part, to the simple fact that males and females are conforming to different sets of expectations. A second, and more interesting, implication is that the behavior of men and women would change dramatically if the stereotypes that others hold for them changed dramatically.

To test this line of reasoning, we conducted a two-session experiment. In session one, female students at Princeton University characterized themselves on a series of sex-role stereotypic traits in the context of an attitude survey. Then, approximately three weeks later, they returned to participate in what they believed to be an unrelated study concerned with the impression formation process.

In the context of this study, in which we tried to simulate a "blind dating" situation, the subjects were induced to characterize themselves to a male partner, who, as it turned out, was either desirable or undesirable and whose stereotype of the ideal woman conformed very closely to the conventional female stereotype or its opposite.

The results indicated that female subjects who expected to meet an attractive, desirable male portrayed themselves as more "feminine," and, interestingly, performed less intelligently on a bogus I.Q.test, when they thought the male held conventional rather than nonconventional views.

Now, I'd like to make a few brief comments about these results:

First, it is important to realize that these Princeton students were, at the time of the study, planning, by and large, to become doctors, lawyers, professors, and the like. They were, in fact, very bright and highly motivated students.

Second, it is interesting to compare the psychological situations we created in the lab with those situations females typically face in the "real world." Clearly, because most of the males in our culture females are likely to interact with hold conventional sex-role stereotypes, the condition that exists in the "real world" is likely to be our so-called, Conventional Condition. If so, women will be motivated more often to "look dumb" than to act smart, at least until men change their stereotypes of women.

Third, let me be the first to admit that in our Unconventional Stereotype Condition, we have created an experimental condition in the laboratory which probably does not exist in the "real world." Rather

than apologize, however, for the artificiality of the findings that obtained in this "nonsexist" male condition, e.g., the finding that female subjects achieved the highest scores on the bogus I.Q. test, let me emphasize that this condition suggests something about the way the "real world" could be if we made it more like the world of our laboratory.

Fourth, I want to emphasize that our analysis is not intended to suggest that only women are affected by stereotypes that others hold toward them. On the contrary, we would propose that when motivated to impress another person, men, just as women, will behave in ways to confirm the other's stereotypic expectations. If this other person happens to be a female and if she happens to hold a very unconventional view of men, then the men might be expected to portray themselves in a less masculine, or traditional, manner. In fact, a recent study conducted by Brenda Major at SUNY, Buffalo, demonstrated just that.

Since conformity in this initial study was demonstrated primarily by means of self-presentational responses on written instruments, the female subjects never, in fact, had the opportunity to meet and interact with their male partners. Thus, two important questions remain to be addressed. First, would these women have actually behaved in a more (or less) "feminine" manner when in the presence of a man presumed to hold a conventional (or unconventional) stereotype of women? And, if so, exactly how would they fulfill each stereotype?

Second, would these portrayals, in addition to confirming or reinforcing the man's belief in his sex-role stereotype, make a positive impression on him?

Two follow-up studies were designed to answer these questions. In the first study, two students, Debby Sherk and Carl von Baeyer, and I arranged to have undergraduate, female applicants for the position of Research Assistant interviewed by a confederate, male interviewer. Once again, the women learned (in this case, a few days before their interview) that the male interviewer's conception of the ideal female job applicant conformed either to the conventional sex-role stereotype or to its opposite. The interviewer, of course, was blind to the condition of the subject.

The results indicated that, apparently without being fully aware of it, our female applicants did present themselves in a more traditionally "feminine" manner when they believed the interviewer held traditional views of women. For example, the women in this experiment strategically dressed to meet the stereotypic expectations of the interviewer. (Recall, that not only were subjects randomly assigned to experimental condition, but also were actually in their condition before they came to the job interview.) Women who anticipated a conventional interviewer dressed in a more feminine manner. They wore significantly more make-up and clothing accessories such as earrings, scarves, and the like. Possibly as a result of these differences, these women were actually judged by independent male observers to be more physically attractive--though not more "seductive." (As an aside, since this is the only study I know of where the subject's own physical attractiveness is a dependent variable, if anyone knows of any others, I'd appreciate it if you could let me know.) During the interview, these women offered more traditionally feminine answers to questions such as, "Do you have plans

to include children and marriage with your career plans?" and, interestingly, looked less at the interviewer while answering his questions, a decidedly submissive, nonverbal gesture. Thus, applicants did present themselves in a more traditionally "feminine" manner when they believed the interviewer held conventional views of women, and, interestingly, this pattern of results held not only for verbal and nonverbal measures but also for measures of physical appearance.

But, would these "feminine" behaviors create a positive impression? In other words, would the applicant be offered the job? In the second study, two students, Shelagh Towson and Glenda MacDonald, and I presented a videotape of female actresses portraying the "average" applicant in each of the two conditions of the first study to a group of male students who were asked to evaluate the applicant's probable success and satisfaction in a number of potential careers.

Thus, male subjects watched a videotaped female job applicant present herself either in a stereotypically feminine (i.e., jewelry, make-up, little direct eye contact) or less traditional (i.e., no jewelry or make-up, more eye contact) manner.

The results indicated that for traditionally female occupations (e.g., preschool teacher, dietician, librarian), the "feminine" self-presentation (i.e., the presentation originally given to the interviewer thought to hold a conventional stereotype of women) was, indeed, judged more positively. However, if the job was a traditionally male occupation (e.g., insurance agent, department store manager, high school principal), the less traditionally feminine presentation (i.e., the presentation originally given to the interviewer thought to hold an unconventional stereotype of women) was judged more positively. Thus,

the behavior that confirms a conventional stereotype seems to backfire when the job is traditionally masculine.

Unexpectedly, male subjects' own attitudes toward women, as measured by the Spence and Helmreich "Attitudes Toward Women" scale, influenced their judgments only for the two positions defined least clearly as gender-linked--in our study, these positions were social worker and personnel manager. For these two positions, traditional men were less likely to predict success for either applicant than were more "liberated" males. When the gender-linked requirements of a job are ambiguous, due, possibly, to the changing definition of the job itself, male subjects may feel free to allow their personal prejudices (in this instance, their beliefs that women belong in the home and that they are not competent employees, regardless of personal style or the nature of the job) to influence their judgments.

To sum up, while these studies suggest that our stereotypes may be maintained or reinforced because the fact that we hold them may induce people, who want to impress us, to confirm them, this last study suggests that women who want to succeed in male-dominated occupations ought to abandon stereotypically feminine modes of self-presentation, at least in an initial, interview situation.

Notes

1. This talk is based on the following three papers: (1) Zanna, M.P. & Pack, S. J. On the self-fulfilling nature of apparent sex differences in behavior. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1975, 11, 583-591; (2) von Baeyer, C. L., Sherk, D. L. & Zanna, M.P. Impression management in the job interview: When the female applicant meets the male (chauvinist) interviewer. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1981, 7, 45-51; and (3) Towson, S.M.J., MacDonald, G. & Zanna, M.P. Confirming sex-role stereotypes in the job interview: Payoffs and pitfalls. Paper presented at the Canadian Psychological Association meetings, Toronto, June 1981.